

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Commencement Address at the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut

May 20, 2015

The President. Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat. Class of 2015: Ahoy!

Audience members. Ahoy! [*Laughter*]

The President. There are now fewer days to go until the class of 2015 graduates than—never mind. [*Laughter*] There are now zero days until the class of 2015 graduates.

Thank you, Admiral Zukunft, for your kind introduction and for your leadership of our coastguardsmen on all seven continents; Governor Malloy, Secretary Johnson, Ambassador, distinguished guests, faculty and staff, families and friends.

And Admiral Stosz, as you prepare to conclude your time as Superintendent, thank you for your outstanding stewardship of this Academy. You made history as the first woman ever to lead one of our Nation's service academies. And I know you'll keep making history, because I was proud to nominate you for your third star and as the Coast Guard's next Deputy Commandant for Mission Support.

It is wonderful to be with all of you here today on this beautiful day. Michelle sends her greetings as well. She is the proud sponsor of the Coast Guard cutter *Stratton*, which is tough to beat. But as Admiral Zukunft pointed out, both the Coast Guard and I were born on the same day. So I want you all to know, every birthday from now on, I will be thinking about the Coast Guard. [*Laughter*]

Now, the Coast Guard may be the smallest of our services, but I have to say, you may also be the loudest. [*Laughter*] Whenever I visit our military bases, there are always lots of soldiers and sailors and airmen and marines. They make a lot of noise. But wherever I am, across the country or around the world, including Afghanistan—nowhere near an ocean—the most determined cheer from the crowd comes from our proud coastguardsmen, because usually, there might only be one or two of them. [*Laughter*]

And as Paul mentioned, in my State of the Union Address this year, I mentioned how I've seen America at its best when commissioning our new officers, including here in New London. And it's true, some folks across the country didn't quite get the reference. One person tweeted that they were pretty sure I just made this up. And then there was one person in town who asked, "Did Obama name drop New London?" So let me do it again. It is a great honor to be back in New London, at the United States Coast Guard Academy, to salute the newest ensigns of America's oldest continuous maritime service.

Cadets, this is a day to celebrate all that you've achieved over these past 4 years. You have excelled at one of the most selective and rigorous academic institutions in America. You've held yourselves to a high code of conduct, proven yourself worthy to be called commissioned officers of the United States Coast Guard.

You pushed yourselves physically, from Swab Summer to beating your officers at basketball and softball and football. [*Laughter*] You braced up, squared your meals, spent Friday nights waxing the floors, maybe a little "Rodeo Buffing." [*Laughter*] I saw the video. That looks dangerous, by the way. [*Laughter*] You made your mark, and you will be

remembered: in Chase Hall, in this stadium, and at Hanafin's and Bulkeley House. Which reminds me, in keeping with longstanding tradition, I hereby absolve all cadets serving restrictions for minor offenses. *[Laughter]* Minor offenses.

You came together as one team. We are joined today by Commander Merle Smith, the first African American graduate of this Academy, class of 1966, a decorated Vietnam veteran. His legacy endures in all of you, because the graduating class of 2015 is the most diverse in Academy history. And you took care of each other, like family. Today we honor the memory of your classmate from the Republic of Georgia, Soso, along with Beso. Their spirits will live on in the partnerships you forge with coast guards all over the world.

Today you take your rightful place in the Long Blue Line. For Marina Stevens and her family, it is a very long line. Where is Marina? Just wave at me real quick. There she is right there. Marina's dad is Coast Guard civilian. Her mom Janet, an Academy graduate, was a Coast Guard captain and will pin on Marina's shoulder boards today. Marina's grandfather was a coastguardsman. Her great-grandfather joined the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1918. That's four generations, spanning nearly the entire life of the modern Coast Guard. No wonder she's named Marina. *[Laughter]* It's in her blood.

And, cadets, I know that none of you reached this day alone. So join me in giving a huge round of applause to your mentors and your incredible parents and your family members, so many of them, themselves, veterans as well. Please give them a big round of applause.

Class of 2015, I'm here as your Commander in Chief, on behalf of the American people, to say thanks to each of you. Thanks for choosing to serve, for stepping up, for giving up the comforts of civilian life, for putting on that uniform. Thank you for the service you are about to render, the life of purpose that you've embraced, the risks that you've accepted, and the sacrifices that you will make.

But I'm not here to just sing your praises. I want to speak to you about what comes next. Soon, you'll fan out across the Coast Guard, and some of you will go to sectors and shore command. Some of you will start your duty aboard cutters. Some of you will start flight training. America needs you. And we need the Coast Guard more than ever.

We need you to safeguard our ports against all threats, including terrorism. We need you to respond in times of disaster or distress and lead your rescue teams as they jump out of perfectly good helicopters. We need you in the Caribbean and Central America, interdicting drugs before they reach our streets and damage our kids. We need you in the Middle East, in the Gulf, alongside our Navy; in places like West Africa, where you helped to keep the ports open so that the world could fight a deadly disease. We need you in the Asia-Pacific, to help our partners train their own coast guards to uphold maritime security and freedom of navigation in waters vital to our global economy.

These are all demanding missions. The pace of operations is intense. And these are tight fiscal times for all our services, including the Coast Guard. But we are going to keep working to give you the boats and the cutters and the aircraft that you need to complete the missions we ask of you.

We're moving ahead with new Fast Response Cutters, new Offshore Patrol Cutters. We're on track to have a full fleet of new National Security Cutters, the most advanced in history. And I've made it clear that I will not accept a budget that continues these draconian budget cuts called sequestration, because our Nation and our military and our Coast Guard deserve better.

And this brings me to the challenge I want to focus on today, one where our coastguardsmen are already on the front lines and that, perhaps more than any other, will shape your entire careers, and that's the urgent need to combat and adapt to climate change.

As a nation, we face many challenges, including the grave threat of terrorism. And as Americans, we will always do everything in our power to protect our country. Yet even as we meet threats like terrorism, we cannot—and we must not—ignore a peril that can affect generations.

Now, I know there are still some folks back in Washington who refuse to admit that climate change is real. And on a day like today, it's hard to get too worried about it. There are folks who will equivocate. They'll say, "You know, I'm not a scientist." Well, I'm not either. *[Laughter]* But the best scientists in the world know that climate change is happening. Our analysts in the intelligence community know climate change is happening. Our military leaders—generals and admirals, Active Duty and retired—know it's happening. Our homeland security professionals know it is happening. And our Coast Guard knows it's happening.

The science is indisputable. The fossil fuels we burn release carbon dioxide, which traps heat. And the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are now higher than they have been in 800,000 years. The planet is getting warmer. Fourteen of the 15 hottest years on record have been in the past 15 years. Last year was the planet's warmest year ever recorded.

Our scientists at NASA just reported that some of the sea ice around Antarctica is breaking up even faster than expected. The world's glaciers are melting, pouring new water into the ocean. Over the past century, the world sea level rose by about 8 inches. Now, that was in the last century; by the end of this century, it's projected to rise another 1 to 4 feet.

Cadets, the threat of a changing climate cuts to the very core of your service. You've been drawn to water, like the poet who wrote, "the heart of the great ocean sends a thrilling pulse through me." You know the beauty of the sea, but you also know its unforgiving power.

Here at the Academy, climate change—understanding the science and the consequences—is part of the curriculum, and rightly so, because it will affect everything that you do in your careers. Some of you have already served in Alaska and aboard icebreakers, and you know the effects. As America's Maritime Guardian, you've pledged to remain always ready—Semper Paratus—ready for all threats. And climate change is one of those most severe threats.

And this is not just a problem for countries on the coasts or for certain regions of the world. Climate change will impact every country on the planet. No nation is immune. So I'm here today to say that climate change constitutes a serious threat to global security, an immediate risk to our national security. And make no mistake, it will impact how our military defends our country. And so we need to act, and we need to act now.

After all, isn't that the true hallmark of leadership? When you're on deck, standing your watch, you stay vigilant. You plan for every contingency. And if you see storm clouds gathering, or dangerous shoals ahead, you don't sit back and do nothing. You take action, to protect your ship, to keep your crew safe. Anything less is negligence. It is a dereliction of duty. And so too with climate change. Denying it or refusing to deal with it endangers our national security. It undermines the readiness of our forces.

It's been said of life on the sea, "The pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails." Cadets, like you, I reject pessimism. We know

what we as Americans can achieve when we set ourselves to great endeavors. We are, by nature, optimists, but we're not blind optimists. We know that wishful thinking in the face of all evidence to the contrary would set us on a course for disaster. If we are to meet this threat of climate change, we must be realists. We have to readjust the sails.

And that's why confronting climate change is now a key pillar of American global leadership. When I meet with leaders around the world, it's often at the top of our agenda, a core element of our diplomacy. And you are part of the first generation of officers to begin your service in a world where the effects of climate change are so clearly upon us. It will shape how every one of our services plan, operate, train, equip, and protect their infrastructure, their capabilities, today and for the long term. So let me be specific on how your generation will have to lead the way: to both prepare ourselves and how to prevent the worst effects in the future.

Around the world, climate change increases the risk of instability and conflict. Rising seas are already swallowing low-lying lands, from Bangladesh to Pacific islands, forcing people from their homes. Caribbean islands and Central American coasts are vulnerable as well. Globally, we could see a rise in climate change refugees. And I guarantee you, the Coast Guard will have to respond. Elsewhere, more intense droughts will exacerbate shortages of water and food, increase competition for resources, and create the potential for mass migrations and new tensions. All of which is why the Pentagon calls climate change a "threat multiplier."

Understand, climate change did not cause the conflicts we see around the world. Yet what we also know is that severe drought helped to create the instability in Nigeria that was exploited by the terrorist group Boko Haram. It's now believed that drought and crop failures and high food prices helped fuel the early unrest in Syria, which descended into civil war in the heart of the Middle East. So, increasingly, our military and our combatant commands, our services—including the Coast Guard—will need to factor climate change into plans and operations, because you need to be ready.

Around the world, climate change will mean more extreme storms. No single weather event can be blamed solely on climate change. But Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines gave us a possible glimpse of things to come: one of the worst cyclones ever recorded, thousands killed, many more displaced, billions of dollars in damage, and a massive international relief effort that included the United States military and its Coast Guard. So more extreme storms will mean more humanitarian missions to deliver lifesaving help. Our forces will have to be ready.

As Admiral Zukunft already mentioned, climate change means Arctic sea ice is vanishing faster than ever. By the middle of this century, Arctic summers could be essentially ice free. We're witnessing the birth of a new ocean: new sea lanes, more shipping, more exploration, more competition for the vast natural resources below.

In Alaska, we have more than 1,000 miles of Arctic coastline. The United States is an Arctic nation, and we have a great interest in making sure that the region is peaceful, that its indigenous people and environment are protected, and that its resources are managed responsibly in partnership with other nations. And that means all of you are going to have to step up, because few know the Arctic better than the U.S. Coast Guard. You've operated there across nearly 150 years. And as the Arctic opens, the role that the Coast Guard plays will only grow. I believe that our interests in the Arctic demand that we continue to invest in an enduring Coast Guard icebreaking capacity.

I was proud to nominate your last Commandant, Admiral Papp, as our Special Representatives for the Arctic. And as the U.S. chairs the Arctic Council this year, I'm committed to advancing our interests in this critical region because we have to be ready in the Arctic as well.

Climate change, and especially rising seas, is a threat to our homeland security, our economic structure—infrastructure, the safety and health of the American people. Already, today, in Miami and Charleston, streets now flood at high tide. Along our coasts, thousands of miles of highways and roads, railways, energy facilities are all vulnerable. It's estimated that a further increase in sea level of just one foot by the end of this century could cost our Nation \$200 billion.

In New York Harbor, the sea level is already a foot higher than a century ago, which was one of the reasons Superstorm Sandy put so much of lower Manhattan underwater. During Sandy, the Coast Guard mounted a heroic response, along with our National Guard and Reserve. But rising seas and stronger storms will mean more disaster response missions. And we need the Coast Guard to be ready, because you are America's maritime first responder.

Climate change poses a threat to the readiness of our forces. Many of our military installations are on the coast, including, of course, our Coast Guard stations. Around Norfolk, high tides and storms increasingly flood parts of our Navy base and an airbase. In Alaska, thawing permafrost is damaging military facilities. Out West, deeper droughts and longer wildfires could threaten training areas our troops depend on.

So politicians who say they care about military readiness ought to care about this as well. Just as we're helping American communities prepare to deal with the impacts of climate change, we have to help our bases and ports as well. Not just with stronger seawalls and natural barriers, but with smarter, more resilient infrastructure, because when the seas rise and storms come, we all have to be ready.

Now, everything I've discussed with you so far is about preparing for the impacts of climate change. But we need to be honest: Such preparation and adaptation alone will not be enough. As men and women in uniform, you know that it can be just as important, if not more important, to prevent threats before they can cause catastrophic harm. And the only way—the only way—the world is going to prevent the worst effects of climate change is to slow down the warming of the planet.

Some warming is now inevitable. But there comes a point when the worst effects will be irreversible. And time is running out. And we all know what needs to happen. It's no secret. The world has to finally start reducing its carbon emissions now. And that's why I've committed the United States to leading the world on this challenge.

Over the past 6 years, we've done more than ever to reduce harmful emissions: unprecedented investments to cut energy waste in our homes and buildings, standards to double the fuel efficiency of our vehicles. We're using more clean energy than ever before: more solar, more wind. It's all helped us reduce our carbon emissions more than any other advanced nation. And today, we can be proud that our carbon pollution is near its lowest levels in almost two decades. But we've got to do more.

So going forward, I've committed to doubling the pace at which we cut carbon pollution. And that means we all have to step up. And it will not be easy. It will require sacrifice, and the politics will be tough. But there is no other way. We have to make our homes and buildings more efficient. We have to invest in more energy research and renewable technologies. We

have to move ahead with standards to cut the amount of carbon pollution in our power plants. And working with other nations, we have to achieve a strong global agreement this year to start reducing the total global emission, because every nation must do its part. Every nation.

So this will be tough. But as so often is the case, our men and women in uniform show us the way. They're used to sacrifice and they are used to doing hard stuff. Class of 2015, you've built new equipment that uses less energy. You've designed new vessels with fewer harmful emissions. Stephen Horvath, selected as a Fulbright Scholar, will research new technologies for renewable energies. The Coast Guard is building more fuel-efficient cutters. So you're already leading. And, cadets, as you go forward, I challenge you to keep imagining and building the new future we need and make your class motto your life's work: "To go where few dare." This is a place where we need you.

Across our military, our bases and ports are using more solar and wind, which helps save money that we can use to improve readiness. The Army is pursuing new, lighter, more fuel-efficient vehicles. The Air Force F-22 broke the sound barrier using biofuels. And the Navy runs an entire carrier strike group, the Green Fleet, with biofuels. Our Marines have deployed to Afghanistan with portable solar panels, lightening their load and reducing dangerous resupply missions. So fighting climate change and using energy wisely also makes our forces more nimble and more ready. And that's something that should unite us as Americans. This cannot be subject to the usual politics and the usual rhetoric. When storms gather, we get ready.

And I want to leave you with a story that captures the persistence and the patriotism that this work requires, because this is a nation made up of folks who know how to do hard things. Down in the front row is Dr. Olivia Hooker. In 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when she was just 6 years old, her African American community was attacked by White mobs. It was a horrific racial incident. And hundreds of innocent African Americans were killed. The mobs destroyed her father's clothing store. They looted her house. They even burned the little clothes for her doll.

And Olivia could have given in to bitterness. She could have been pessimistic about her country. Instead, she made it better. So, in World War II, she enlisted as a SPAR, becoming the first African American woman in the Coast Guard. As a yeoman in Boston, she served with distinction. By the time the war was won, she was discharged, she was a petty officer second class.

With the GI bill, Olivia earned her master's, then her doctorate. She has been a professor and mentor to her students, a passionate advocate for Americans with disabilities, a psychologist counseling young children, a caregiver at the height of the AIDS epidemic, a tireless voice for justice and equality. And a few months ago, Olivia turned a hundred years old.

So, Olivia, you're going to have to tell us you're secret. She's still as sharp as they come, and as fearless. In Yonkers, New York, she even still volunteers as a member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary and was determined to be here with us today. So, Dr. Hooker, thank you. You're an inspiration. Hundred years old. So Dr. Hooker has led a remarkable life. But this is what she says: "It's not about you or me. It's about what we can give to this world."

Cadets, you're at the start of your careers. And we cannot know, each of us, how many days we will walk this Earth. We can't guarantee we're all going to live to a hundred. But what we can do is live each day to its fullest. What we can do is look squarely at what will make the biggest difference for future generations and be willing to tackle those challenges.

And as you embark on your life of service, as you man your stations and head to the seas and take to the skies, should the sea begin to surge and the waves swell and the wind blows hard against your face, I want you to think back to this moment, to feel what you feel in your hearts today. And if you remember all that you've learned here at the Thames, how you came here and came together, out of many one, to achieve as a team what you could never do alone; if you resolve to stay worthy of traditions that endure—honor, respect, devotion to duty; if you heed the wisdom and humility of a petty officer second class from Oklahoma, to think not of yourself, but what you can give to this world, then I'm confident that you will truly go where few dare. And you will rise to meet the challenges that not only face our country, but face our planet. And your legacy will be a nation that is stronger and safer for generations to come.

So, class of 2015, thank you for your service. Congratulations. God bless you. God bless all our coastguardsmen. God bless our United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:42 a.m. at the United States Coast Guard Academy. In his remarks, he referred to Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard Paul F. Zukunft; Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. Archil Gegeshidze; Sandra Stosz, Superintendent, U.S. Coast Guard Academy; Bersarian "Beso" Gorjoladze and Soso Makaridze, U.S. Coast Guard Academy cadets who were killed in a car crash in Hopewell, NJ, on March 7; and Jim Stevens, father, and Mike Emerson, grandfather, of U.S. Coast Guard Academy graduate Marina Stevens.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, CT, commencement address.

Locations: New London, CT.

Names: Emerson, Mike; Gegeshidze, Archil ; Gorjoladze, Bersarian "Beso"; Hooker, Olivia J.; Horvath, Stephen; Johnson, Jeh C.; Makaridze, Soso; Malloy, Dannel P.; Obama, Michelle; Papp, Robert J., Jr.; Smith, Merle; Stevens, Janet; Stevens, Jim; Stevens, Marina; Stosz, Sandra; Zukunft, Paul F.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : National Guard; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Budget, Federal : Fiscal year 2016 budget; Connecticut : Governor; Connecticut : President's visits; Connecticut : U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London; Drug abuse and trafficking : Foreign narcotics traffickers; Energy : Carbon dioxide emissions, reduction; Energy : Energy efficiency and weatherization :: Homes and buildings; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Environment : Arctic region policy; Environment : Carbon emissions; Environment : Climate change; Georgia, Republic of : Ambassador to U.S.; Homeland Security, Department of : Coast Guard, U.S.; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Natural disasters : Hurricane Sandy; Philippines : Typhoon Haiyan, damage and recovery efforts; State, Department of : Special Representative for the Arctic; Syria : Civil war and sectarian conflict; Terrorism : Boko Haram terrorist organization; Terrorism : Global threat.

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